



Interview with Stuart Cairns

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Interview with Stuart Cairns

Stuart Cairns works as a silversmith combining natural materials and found objects alongside precious metals to create artefacts in the tradition of tableware and domestic objects. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in silversmithing and jewelry from the University of Ulster in 2000, returning to complete a Master's degree in 2006. He is a member of the British Designer Silversmiths and a part-time lecturer in the University of Ulster. Cairns has exhibited widely; selected exhibitions include, Setting the Scene, Crafts Study Centre, Farnham, 2013; Collect, Saatchi Gallery, London, 2012; Fit for Purpose, The V&A, London, 2012; Linen Diaspora, 4th Biennale internationale du lin de Portneuf, Quebec, 2011; and Side x Side, Hämeenlinna, Finland, 2009. His work has been purchased for both public and private collections including the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, University of Ulster and the Ulster Museum.

Artist's website: <https://stuartcairns.com/about>

Valérie Morisson: Your works, mixing found objects and pieces of silversmith cannot easily be classified as they straddle various traditions and practices. Was the distinction between the fine arts and applied arts relevant to your training as a silversmith? Is it to your own practice and to contemporary artistic creation in Ireland?

Stuart Cairns: My training at Art College was fairly open, the applied arts students mixed with the fine art students; some had a broad view the arts so there wasn't much distinction. In terms of my own practice I don't see much distinction other than my practice is based in making, I would look at a lot of contemporary sculptural, especially material based works. I think there still is a separation between fine and applied arts in Ireland, my work sitting between the two can find difficulty in finding a place in exhibitions.

VM: You recently took part in a thrilling exhibition entitled *The Art of Gathering*, at the New Craftsman Gallery, St Ives, Cornwall, which drew attention to collecting and harvesting. How important is this part of your activity? How are the collecting and the assembling connected?

SC: Collecting / gathering / harvesting has become central to how I work, I primarily respond to and am interested in materiality. The objects and materials I collect provide the spark / inspiration for my work, they also act as grounding point, locating my work within the landscape and reflecting my relationship with my environment. These materials are the initial point of excitement, the next challenge for me is working them into an object which enhances their presence and is sympathetic to their nature. Adding to rather than taking away the essence of what they are / represent.

VM: You generally collect rather small, tiny fragments of vegetation or manufactured objects. Have you always been fascinated with small scale, fragile, banal objects?

SC: I think I find fragments and elements interesting because they are incomplete and therefore leave room to imagine what they came from, what function they had, what life they have led. I think I've always been drawn to things, seeing the visual richness that is all around us, probably beginning as a child collecting seashells and making simple things from them, making bows and arrows in the woods and again when working as a gardener seeing the investing lines for hedge cuttings and offcuts. The small scale makes items more personal, more intimate and implies part of larger things.

VM: Walking is crucial to your art practice and way of life. It has recently been the focus of much critical and theoretical writing, from leading members of the psychogeographical and ecocritical movements. How does walking impact your relation to the natural environment and your identity as an artist?

SC: Walking has given my relationship with my environment a real depth and a very personal connection. It gives me a sense of peace with which to think / consider / daydream and reflect, space for the mind to wander as well as the body. The repeated walking also sees me tuned into / sensitive to my environment, noticing small moments where elements stand out, I see more and notice change. Adding in regular sea swims has also enhanced my connection with the sea and its varying conditions. All this has added to my well-being enormously and has shaped my identity as an artist as subconsciously I am absorbing a large amount of visual and tactile information while at the same time having space for my imagination to stretch out, expand and play.

VM: How technically difficult is it to assemble the fragments you collect given that the materials can be very different?

SC: There can be considerable difficulty in combining or utilising various materials as I always seek to do so in a sensitive manner so whatever I am working with is enhanced and not reduced by the process. I can spend a lot of time playing with pieces attempting to find an appropriate way of manipulating / joining them. Sometimes pieces I have gathered can sit on the bench for a considerable time until I am struck with a suitable way of working with them. I would rather leave things to one side rather than rush and misuse them. I treat everything precious and unique regardless of the social / monetary value attached to them.

VM: You assemble various fragments by using strings and knotting, tying together bits and pieces, combining materials, creating some continuity in shape where there was only fragmentation. Is this gesture and *praxis* also metaphorical?

SC: Utilising very visible mechanisms for joining is a very deliberate act, it is my intention to show that these things were lifted, chosen and reworked into the new. That the human hand is made visible in this process, that they capture and hold

a moment of lived life / lived experience through their construction. I hope this connects with others through the commonality of the human hand and its ability to tie, make and connect.

VM: Because, very often, the ties and joints in your works remain visible, they look fragile and therefore both precarious and precious. Is fragility something you are interested in?

SC: I think so, delicate work / objects add to a sense of preciousness as it has the sense of the potential to break to be lost. I also love to play with the idea of the essence of an object or thing. Something that is implied / sketched out / suggested because it requires completion by the viewer and the viewer's imagination and this adds to the object's power as it invites the participation of the observer. Weight / substance is an interesting thing to play with as a maker, I tend to like the extremes – something dense and heavy or something that is barely there. Skeletal forms, frameworks, ghost forms, traces and remnants all suggest larger forms and expanded lives. Mass and weight have heavier impact and can add emphasis to the materials selected. Something that sits in between doesn't have the same sense of presence and I'm always seeking to say as much as possible with my objects, to contain the greatest presence in the smallest things.

VM: After the age of conceptual art, and in parallel with the dematerialisation of digital art, one may observe a return to materiality, matter, material in contemporary art. Is this shift a return to tradition or the reflection of a renewed ecological awareness?

SC: I think a return to materiality, certainly in my case, is more a reflection of what it is to be human alive and present on this planet. Conceptual and digital works and worlds have their place but material matter roots us in the present – it is the air we breathe, the ground we walk on and the food we eat. It is the essence of every day of our lives. Without that we lose something essential within the human experience.

VM: Your objects enhance materiality and material imagination, they make us sensitive to the singular defects, textures, shapes of the debris. In doing so, they activate our sensitivity, our haptic senses. Are sight and touch deeply connected in your handling of the material?

SC: Absolutely, in my walking and photography practice I am constantly training my eye, constantly looking and absorbing. Trying to take in the sense of what surrounds me, breaking it down to small moments of line, form, changing in light, colour and texture. Touch is intimately related to sight as well; touch can be imagined through the seen, we understand the tactility of something without necessarily having to handle it through memory and associations. At the same time I'm intimately connected to materials and places through touch, through the objects and materials I handle in making the work and also through the experience of daily walking and gathering. Increasingly I brush my hand over the bark of a tree, the barnacled surface of a shoreline stone and walk barefoot to feel the ground beneath

me. My work is very much about the personal, the intimate relationships we have with places, materials and things and touch is surely the most intimate of the senses.

VM: One may view your works as an anthropological enquiry into tool making and recycling but they also ponder the conflicting notions of beauty and usefulness. Your poetic objects blend the hybridity of what Lévi-Strauss defined as *bricolage* with the craftsmanship of jewelry. Would you describe the assemblage of found material and silverware as a beautification of the banal and a celebration of simplicity?

SC: I don't see anything I work with as banal, I see everything as exceptional and so bring that sense of preciousness to the work. It is about elevating the everyday and the found, to demonstrate to the world what I see in the material life of the everyday, how each material, each object holds its own sense of wonder. Wonder, which carries with it a sense of beauty and perhaps a certain elegance, is what drives the work. The silverwork has to rise to meet the qualities of the pieces or materials it is carried to, to bring it to life and demonstrate its exceptional qualities.

VM: Could you say a word about your drawings? Do you conceive them as independent from your three-dimensional works?

SC: I would have previously said my drawing practice varies in its connectedness with my making practice, some elements more directly connecting than others. But more recently I have seen more elements of the drawing practice express themselves in the made objects. It is all the same language, all the same level of investigation into the sense of being and the lived landscape, they are different points on the same continuum of creativity.

VM: Time is also stamped on the objects, some of which look almost prehistoric. Is the presence of the past, of time passing by, something particularly inspirational for Irish artists living in the West?

SC: I think you can't help but be influenced by the physical past as it lies in the landscape. There are so many abandoned buildings, old stone cottages, farm houses and forts, discarded machinery scattered across the countryside where people have either left to go to the city or left the country altogether. So to be surrounded by the remnants of past lives, with a physical culture that has not been maintained or restored certainly impresses the power of past things speaking of past lives.

VM: By displaying your utensils in series, you seem to be referring to the displays of natural history or anthropological museums. Is it a deliberate reference?

SC: It is one of the elements of display I play with, a sense of artefacts presented to be understood, strange things gifted importance by how they are placed. I also play with the arrangements in reference to formal layouts of dining utensils, again referencing the domestic experience. Recently I've thought of the objects, especially the more abstract part forms, as a kind of physical visual language – as clipped words, phrases and full lines laid out to speak of a place and a way of being.

VM: Many of your objects make the domestic and the wild, the familiar and the unfamiliar collide, which may give them some surrealist charm. How playful are the objects supposed to be?

SC: The objects are born out of play – out of playfully looking at the landscape, of looking at materials and form and of playfully putting things together. Even though the making process may be laborious I am always playful in how I handle and arrange the pieces. There is seriousness within the play of course, the seriousness of how we do not seem to value our material world and the price that has, both to us and the ecosystems and land we depend upon.

Interview carried out in December 2019.

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**Fig. 1 – Stuart Cairns, *Gathered Set 1*,
hawthorn and oak twigs, silver, 2016-2018.**
Photograph by the artist from his portfolio.



**Fig. 2 – Stuart Cairns, *Holy Sprig Vessel*,
silver, vintage Irish
linen thread, driftwood
and holy sprig, 2019.**
Photograph by the artist
from his portfolio.



Fig. 3 – Stuart Cairns, *Hunter Necklace*, found sea rope, found sea plastic, cormorant skull, Irish linen thread, found copper pipe, fishing float, silver, 2018.

Photograph by the artist from his portfolio.



Fig. 4 – Stuart Cairns, *Set of Three*, bramble stem, steel, silver, line thread, fishing line; found steel, silver, stainless steel, linen thread; found steel, oxidised silver, linen thread, 2016-2018.

Photograph by the artist from his portfolio.